

The Alembic

Spring 2003



PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

The Alembic

Spring 2003

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Poetry

Reasons to Hate Birds

Stuart Bartow

I hate birds because
robins in the morning
are so joyful
their lilt makes me homesick
when I'm home.
When a flock of sparrows
spins like a whirlwind
my soul vanishes
into their body.
I hate mockingbirds because they mimic
my dead cat's plaint.
Who are the worst escapees from hell,
grackles or starlings?
I hate birds because they
can't think.
I hate their yawning young,
their slurping of worms.
I hate chickadees
for their horniness,
their twilight serenades,
and because they are absolutely innocent
in their meanness.
I hate blue jays because
they are too big, ravens
because they are too beautiful.
Crows are everywhere
mocking our folly.
Hawks are oblivious.
Owls I hate for their mindless secrets.
Especially barn owls
who bittersweet the midnight.
I hate birds because sometimes
when they go high
the best part of me goes with them
and does not return.
Because we bash them with our cars,
making us guilty
for the way we live,
I hate them all.

Including cardinals
because they mate for life.
When one was impaled
on my truck's grill
I grieved for her lover,
an apparition,
a blood stain
in the snowy branches.

My Grandfather Feasted

Robert Cooperman

“Watch an old man when he starts to shout for food.”

—George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe*

His last summer,
my grandfather feasted
on raw oysters and beer,
the boardwalk air
heavy as dead fish.

He'd send me to the deli
for ham and Swiss, unthinkable
combinations until his recent
rebellion against my grandmother's
inedible kosher cooking.

Or he'd saunter to the diner
for eggs and sausages,
grease pearling his jowls
he no longer bothered
to shave and slap
with witch hazel.

He ate, my father joked,
“Like he's going to the chair,”
my mother cried he must
be losing his mind: a man
who had always eaten sparingly
as a biblical prophet.

Afterwards, satisfied smoke
shot from both nostrils,
as if after the best
sex he'd ever imagined;
he belched loud as a buffalo,
Life about to close
his mouth forever.

Search For the Magpies' Nest

Hildred Crill

Crowberry, mosses—
all the wild green hoarded, clinging
to ground.

At one branching and another, fungus
tangles a parasitic knot
into bare trees.

Out of life
pairing: sticks attached to the short birch,
looser and looser into higher air,

house of enter
and exit,
what can be made

from unfastening, from wind
that eats, from light
shot through.

The Eye Test

Hildred Crill

A face's soft doubling, washed color
moving away. Before I could even read, they corrected

what I saw. The door of the ink-black room opened
and I sat on the leather chair. When lenses clicked into place

before my eyes, I tried to point my hand, a match
for every insect's direction.

Still the letters don't fall into being
one thing. Pieces knot

in a bunch: the push and pull of my tongue
stop on the consonants' sharp fence. They stay separate

squares, crooks, loops
in a row, shaped with such determination

only human beings could have done this. They are sent east
in a caravan. They will hold their place,

a second horizon. Here meaning's no shortcut
through the maze. I can't say this fragment

from the script in me. The dialogue with the person
who won't answer, who blurred—

disappeared—
looks like this.

Inquiring Minds

Stephan Delbos

When did I become a man?
This isn't the way I had planned it,
And it didn't hurt as much
As I had hoped.

When did my blood turn green?
When did money turn red?
And when did Johnny Carson
Become so damned funny?

Wasn't this supposed to be a process?
Did I miss the survey?
I guess I can be
A bit absent-minded.

Maybe if we change the clock again
Add a twenty-fifth hour,
We can all have some time
To relax.

The stars don't look
As bright as they used to,
But at least they don't
Seem to fall as much.

Is Rhythm Is Life

Stephan Delbos

A staccato of eighths sang from the sax
Like ink on a hotplate.
Is there a bird in the bell?

The sound of one hand clapping is
Slaves before they were slaves
Around a fire,
Imitating their heartbeats.

A natural progression in I-IV-V
Twelve bars only, please.
And triplets and sixteenths and syncopation.

It all fades to rhythm
As we number our days,
Trying to groove
On an eternal time signature.

In Tachikawa

Ira Joe Fisher

The rain over the good, green prefecture
settles on roofs reaching curved
with their ends to catch it. The wood
of the buildings soaks rook-dark,
darker than the sky. I am alone.
I smell the rain and feel it falling
on my face and hair. I step through
a black-framed door into a store selling
mahogany boxes with pictures carved in pearl;
pictures of temples and bowing women
in flowered kimonos. The boxes jiggle
the little light slanting through the window.
Dusk is loosed by the rain. Small, falling moons
break on the street outside the store
and flow, with other moons, away.

Celebration for a Lomen Potential Malignancy

Jacqueline Gens

For millennia you've been making babies,
Tooth, hair, dermatis, raw genetic material
Programmed into cells.
I'm so sorry I thwarted your endeavors,
squashed your hopes for a life in the human realm
this time around and killed your life force.

But your architecture turned outright weird.
"Too much ovulation," the doctors say.
Twisted corridors and interlapping walls
going no where built
a citadel inside for my little
Frankenstein made of bits and pieces
of discarded genes from unused eggs
—the refuse of being a modern woman.

Now, you are born into the light of day—a thick-skinned
Porcine belly with orange dimples—
Cold to the touch for lack of a circulatory system.
I salute your ovarian incentive,
the sheer force of your *lungta*
and wish you well on your journey into being.
Bye-bye my creepy *bebe* jettisoned into the cosmos,
an incinerated canister of medical waste
Send my Greetings to the Universe!!!

Visitation

Jacqueline Gens

For Allen (1926-1997)

A few days later I saw him
seated at a crossroad between two dusty roads
going toward a vista of waterways
reminiscent of cranberry bogs, or saltwater marshes.
I once visited—maybe the river Styx. The crossroads
bore a wooden hand nailed sign, unelaborate
as though in antiquity, another land, or simply barren.
A geography of immensity without habitation.

There you poured over books and papers,
focused intently as you sat on an old wooden stool,
the one air of familiarity, you were dressed in your Calvin Klein
Goodwill navy blazer, my favorite,
pens poking out from the pocket, white shirt and tie.
I stood quietly to your side waiting to assist you
yet not disturb your concentration.
Finished, you turned to me and handed me a sheaf of papers,
“These are for you—for translation”.

Then, you got up and walked slowly down the left crossroad
I followed you, behind you, but then you turned to face me
And said “This is as far as you are allowed to go—I don’t have the water
rights
for your passage”—a hitch of sadness in your voice, your face mostly
impassive,
Bell’s Palsy making your one eye bigger, your face a bit cock-eyed.
But looking straight on as we had finished our business one more time
in clarity and respect, our natural elegance together hung there for a
second
staring at one another wordlessly.
Then I watched you go and knew that you were finally gone
on some other journey to some other place.

Decline of the West

Arthur Gottlieb

Taught all roads lead to Rome,
we followed in the footsteps of blind
seers, who marched us under fallen arches
of triumph, into a darker age.

For centuries, nothing was holier than
that empire, resting so assured upon
crumbled pillars. We worshipped the ground
Greek statues stood upon, modeled mind
and body and art after classic plaster casts,
idolized armless Venuses and penisless
Adonises as God's gift to man.

Even our tongues were fashioned after
the remnants of romance languages. Sex
meant Platonic love of lost souls.
Dogma scholars dug up dripping dirt
we embraced as our religion. The old
wooden war horse was hauled inside
our marble museum gates.

Calamity Janes and town criers wailed
warnings. Beware the trick of the trade
the Trojans fell for, they intoned, but
we laughed at lunatics who'd look a gift
horse in the mouth and see soldiers inside,
rattling sabers.

We cheered on our champions carrying
the torch for war, as if they were Olympic
runners, and swore the glory that had been Greece
would one day be ours.

As it was with Gabriel

Mary Walker Graham

Whore is an epithet I can handle.
It is a stone thrown lightly in my direction,
and I have weight enough to crush it.

I've grown used to accusation.
To be called *liar* is less that to lie,
to be called *thief* is not thievery.

Look at the pages torn out of your book.
If there were sins of omission,
now they are yours.

But don't think I don't know refusal.
What are days if not denial?
I too have watched the sun go down.

I tried. But the world, when it wants you,
is ruthless. I was with him
as she was with Gabriel.

Fathers

Mary Walker Graham

I'm collecting a boatload of fathers.
One by one I herd them to my ship,
unsuspecting, there to strain,
pressed to patriarchy.

Poor fathers, I've loved them all—
some congenial and some sad—
and this one in particular,
he was so bad I've packed him
to the bottom of the operation.
Deep in casket let him lie,
and hope those boards don't break.

Don't pity him for whom
I've saved the bow: because
I love him best I'll pin
his arms back to the sprit—
his breast can bear the pain
his love is always waking.

Poor fathers, they don't know—
once it's filled I'll let them go—
no oars or sails to man them.
Ship ahoy, you sailors:
I'm alone.

Magdalene, Peter, and Jesus by the Sea

Mary Walker Graham

I lift the brush. It holds a tear
of *jaune citron*, thinned with water,
ready to spill to paper. In it's
a bubble of air, which splatters
when pressed. I've painted one portion
of one sleeve on one person in
a picture. They sit by the sea, or:
one sits, she's cross-legged and bent,
the others stand. They're not all there.

One has color only on his hands
and on his feet. He points off
to the edges of the page, as if he'd
wound the man between him
and Magdalene with his leaving.
But how can his gesture hurt him,
whose heart's not there?
Peter is only a splotch of white
around which yellow robes arrange.
The sky's too bright, too blue.
It presses on the poor sketched
people like Giotto's blue
around the halo around Christ.

Something sighs; something's released.
It's mixed in with the plastic
and the glue of paint. It's something
with salt, it must be from the sea.
Or is it the murmur of the voices
of those three there by the coast,
or breath let out of a closet,
or breath mixed with mold
from the pages of an old
old book?

To Fra Angelico

Mary Walker Graham

Hera had Zeus in the form of a dove
and Leda had him as the swan
but Mary, poor Mary, she had only
the domed silences of her piety
to wait in, sitting all alone
in the muted chambers of her mind
while outside her window
the gray-green world faded off
into vagueness and abstraction.

And there was no news, not at first,
of why she trembled. She kept it
hid, like someone holding a pot
down with a lid, how deep inside
the lightness of her limbs there was
something heavy and awash in wonder.
She would have written, had she written,
Belief without his body is hard to bear.

The way you paint it, brother angel,
their eyes never met. I want for once
to see her lift her gaze to his, unfold
her hands from across her breast
and lay them to his hips. Standing,
his muscles unfurl as a flower.
I want to feel the bloom within her,
not just the message, brother, but
the messenger.

Phone Directory

Amy Hauck

The bright yellow volume weighs down on her legs. She reaches for its warmth as either end falls open. She searches—a nervous grasshopper that journeys the leaves of the directory. As a child, I found that a grasshopper would leap from its leaf at the supposition of touch. Her lips quiver as each name forms around them, eyes quickening on the approaching Rs. This page reveals Rabbat, Rabin, and Rabinovich in deep black print. Her lips slow down as “Roberts” sits on them—a light, pleasant taste. It feels familiar—the rise and fall of her mouth along the letters. The decisive “t” that presses her tongue to the roof of her mouth. It sounds as his trombone, heating the pitch black notes.

The book falls through her trembling hands. She does not pick it up. Its weight is as his body was when it stopped playing and was no longer warm to the touch.

Trees

Peter Johnson

How many things can you say about a tree? How many times compare it to our crummy lives, stretch the metaphor until its esophagus bursts, or bleeds? We cut down our trees. Nothing symbolic about that. We didn't lose any sleep over it. The baby raccoons were using them to climb onto the roof and torture me with their pretty faces. "Let me be," I screamed, as they scratched the screen, wanting to lick or maybe even eat me. I couldn't sleep for days, for weeks. I watched the spidery limbs of trees shadowboxing on my bedroom wall, as if something was grieving in them, as if they wanted to be put out of their misery, as if they were saying, "Make it look like an accident." But if by "accident" we mean that which comes without cause or design, there is really no such thing. That's something God would have said, or one of his half-baked philosophers, and they would have been right, for it was indeed my landscaper-cousin who sawed those pretty logs you see drying in the sun, who drove those raccoons away. "Sleep quietly, dry logs," I whisper, before retiring at night, then don my earphones, listening to an overweight actor recite some righteous Wordsworthian iambs.

Just Listen

Peter Johnson

I sit by the window and watch a great mythological bird go down in flames over the supermarket. In fact, it's a kite the neighborhood troublemaker has set on fire. Twenty-one and still living at home, deciding when to cut through a screen and chop us into little pieces. "He wouldn't hurt a fly," his mother would say, as they packed our parts into antiseptic black body bags. I explain this possibility to the garbage men. I'm trying to make friends with them, unable to understand why they leave our empty cans in the middle of the driveway, then laugh as they walk away. One says, "Another name for moving air is wind, and shade is just a very large shadow"—perhaps a nice way to make me feel less eclipsed. It's not working, it's not working. I'm scared for children yet to be abducted, scared for the pregnant woman raped at knife point on the New Jersey Turnpike, scared for what violence does to one's life, how it squats inside the hollow heart like a dead cricket. My son and his friends found a dead cricket, confined it in a plastic Easter egg and buried it in the backyard. It was a kind of time capsule, they explained—a surprise for some future boy archaeologist, someone much happier than us, who will live during a time when trees don't look so depressed, and birds and dogs don't chatter and growl like the chorus in an undiscovered Greek tragedy.

Pumpkin Picking

Martha Marinara

Up the gravel drive
the promised autumn hill
is thickly sprinkled joy
of sun eggs, broken stars
and fire seeds.

My daughters hunt for possibilities:
one painstakingly searches,
her fingertips feel for bumps,
rough spots, the loose twists
of umbilical stems.

The other springs over orange mounds
finds a pumpkin larger than herself,
forty pounds at least, I think.
I tell her only as big as you can pick up.
She begins to roll that one to the car,
its sides soon spotted with mud and gravel.
Her braid twitches down her back,
blue black of witch's night.

My older daughter
brings me a smaller pumpkin
more green than orange
soft brown spot near its base.
We could put the mouth there,
she tells me, no one else will want her,
she'll die here.
I think of the pumpkin broken in the field
her meat picked by feeding birds,
her flat seeds, hundreds of potential children,
fallen, then flying to life inside the soil:
there are worse fates.
I nod assent,
she smiles;
we run down the drive to catch her sister.

Memory and Need

Ted McCrorie

From "The Fall of New York"

Washington looked downstream and saw a demolished
summer and fall, memories of broken, drifting
wheels and soldiers' bodies, thoughtlessly bumping
waves of July. Manhattan nights he had looked out,
cooled by a languid breeze or angered by pointless
brawls in the streets, he'd called on Congressmen *Right now*:
all his needs for small arms, cutlasses, hard coin—
spies would take no Philadelphia paper—
casks of powder, cannons with swivels and lead balls,
pikes and pounds of twine for Marblehead boatmen,
thousands of musket flints and bushels of wheat flour.
Saltpeter as well for pickling the men's meat,
prickling bombs and—sergeants poked at their privates—
stilling their lust. They ate it, grumbling and hardly
acted sexless. More like Scots in the army
dancing strathspeys with girls—or each other as boy-girls.

Untitled

Mai Miller

And Buddha believed that every distinct thing is actually an illusion

And you actually think you've been living for almost half your life.

With each minute another memory dies and music turns into silence faster than you can change your socks, but we just sit here pretending to taste everything we eat.

The drinking water is still contaminated and your life remains unkind, but somehow in the dark you don't seem so tall.

Buddha said becoming is destruction and the rugburns remind me this is true, but you can't honestly sit there and tell me to trust in a stillness that won't last.

From the Rake

Rachel Molino

once
on the bound
his long slim figure
defined
on the ground
man he must have cursed
again
falling on his belly

thrown from a rake with no less beauty
now he sought
to tempt me

Orpheus

Rachel Molino

As in me one wet night sunk backward lucid gazing from its depths upon the ransomed inscriptions of a time past but not yet past the heat between skin and a chair that tilts with the ferment of each new sentence into idea, I found my music. I found myself. Foot plod each dagger covered stair descended till one last virgin well remained black and timeless. Knowing only that Nature is the obligation of the soul, laid trembling step, left bloodied footprint and for the first time became human through Thinking. My head hurt and bled also for its wounds. Slowly emerging—now glistening knobs of doors countless and seen only in defiance of dark stood crying for my last drops. Mindful of the distance tread, I gave, was drawn, and entered how many I know not, returning to ascend white, dry, and lined with eyes.

Sarah

Rachel Molino

Sarah, a little off-center
Felt never before
Placed
At beginning or end

Had hoped to
Tomorrow perhaps
Claim
The core once hers

Now she burned
A different state
Consumed
Charred front and back

Sarah, a little off-center
Like never before
Stood
In the middle, raw.

A Fairy Tale

Beth Nerbonne

The girl swallowed the apple with no fear or suspicion of the old woman. And yet, she knew her from somewhere, didn't she? When she was small and scared...and running. Her mother dead, her father lost. Such an angry queen her stepmother was, but afraid herself, of the beautiful stepdaughter who could take the throne, destroy her life. Something about a mirror, a hunter, a pig's heart. All memories nearly forgotten, until this visitor, this piece of fruit, red as blood, shining as the moon. And on came poisoned sleep.

The girl awoke later in a glass coffin, screaming into a royal mouth. Surrounded by small men, wrinkled, deformed, hungry for her sex. Here was a young boy, promising a kingdom in the clouds, a happily ever after. But all the girl could think about were her stepmother's sad eyes, so like those of the old woman, staring crazily into a broken mirror.

Valentine

Jane Lunin Perel

—*for Marissa*

I close my eyes
hearing your pulse
Flamingos tango
Red hawks soar

Beneath your eyes
Those tiny
Mediterraneans I
Sleep I wake

Your red voice tastes
Like my own throat
All honey and salt

Idyll

Eric Rawson

Dusk rains through the sycamores,
The moon makes a clean breast,
And the swallows, they come back
Choosing the stars they feed on;
Crocuses throb up in the warm batter of the air;

Fat smell of summer grass!—
Peace has made a space in the city,
And I don't want to call you down.
What a lie it has been, my wish
That each day end with you.

The Painted Rib

Eric Rawson

at an art class

I used my brush to civilize the bone.
I spread the red and yellow paint upon

It, splattering teardrops of black until
The aura of those painted pots they sell

At roadside stands in Arizona shone
Across its surface. Like a tortoise comb

Or an ashtray carved from petrified wood,
The rib, which had lain in the desert, chewed

By coyotes and cleaned by sun and wind,
Looked suddenly *handmade*. It was my hand

That used the brush to civilize that bone;
And now it was mine, so I took it home.

Great Beeping

Patrick Shea

What I need is time,
But look what it's done to me:
Weak from sabbatical,
I trudge up rotten steps to the hard wood floor
Where I'll find a rag and clean my teeth,
Running on the fumes of what I left behind.

The landmark promises a new day,
And with it the heroics of tomorrow,
Fire walking, papal duties:
welcome sorrows.

Music Thief

Bruce Smith

Winter in the “new” house where the uncle-stolen
fruits were provisions against the dark of the dark
and the old woman who was someone’s smoking sister

fumed about nothing, and like a tortured figure
the brass cherbus wheeled furious around a sparking,
sooty candle. I held my ear against the transistor

radio uncle “bought” as the world of possessions
took on the irony of quotations, the Hark
the herald angels sang vexed with evangelistic spit

and what was that swaying of the stations
whose word was counter to the smart Dick Clark
and American Bandstand, resistant or

mutinous to the stories located somewhere east of Eden?
In one ear the exhausted talk of Cutty Sark
in the high balls. In the other ear the hiss

and hum—reptile and mammal—like all the twin
creatures in the hold of an invisible ark.
Voices of the black and white Christmas. Mr.

Georgie Woods, the Man with the Goods, said his Amens.
I miss him—his unseen face in the place, patriarch
of the enchanted and the blistering

blue that Xed me. And in the kitchen
the cold meats that were gifts from the Pathmark
made a payment to the silence, a lip service

to the free lunch absolved in the colon.
Once the world rhymed. The din of hearts
muted to a lub-Dub, equivalent, insistent

call and response of the body and the soul swollen
in tribulation or rapture, born in the dark
likeness of the song and what it is.

Orange to Red

Bruce Smith

Rent due. Leaf drop. The last stoop sitting. The last
of new jack swing. The muted trumpet and a scalded maple.
A deep wish to see Nomar in the post season. Whose bitch

am I? Exorbitant, the rents. Not abysmal or profound, but *fast*
like sleep, full like tone. I contribute “as I am able”
to child support. The boy on the subway asks, “Do I look rich?”

to the other hostages to oblivion. Why can't looking be cast
not as statue, but as arc and tenor and style?
She got on at Porter Square and I could not read The Taoist

Body for wanting to look at her and save her from the past
two thousand years of eye rage and shame. The bibliophile
in me gives way to the creature that gives way to the itch.

The boys do a heel-toe slide beat-boxing our Grandmaster Flash.
She got off at Park—her legs scraped clean of the mammal
in strappy black things. Shadows cast. Light twitches

with agitated artfulness (artlessness) like Nomar at bat.
I stood up and my lap was everywhere a miasma and fictional
mooring of motive and father. The ticket's

good if you're white and far from the vast
unrenowned. In the trash — a crutch, a mattress, a cymbal.
What more do I need? A promise and a lick.

Return Through the Third Grade

Bruce Smith

The light was different and what was written
was unreadable because (pause) the language or the glare
when the eyes dilated and I was smitten.

Art begins in humiliation

Auden said

And so her face in the illumination

Of a dream: I moved from where I sat to her.
I got up from my seat like the subjunctive
to touch her as Pygmalion touched the figure.

I'd need a god to snatch me from my class,
to move me from the ticket to the king of prima facie,
to sublimate the solid into gas.

Ask me how her face became the voodoo
of charm, fetish, and curse. Don't ask.
It's the flaw in the dream to make *I you*.

It's the flaw in the dream to awake
in a January, ice floes north, dark water south
(How can that same river be?) The Chinook

does its Heraclitus past the cinderblock, the concrete
slab of dorm room I have to live in forever
with my loud pals, Mao and Crow, Baby and Meat,

the return to my university, but before
I would be there and beered and rubbed up
like a jinn, I must return further

to the third grade, Mrs. Fletcher in a tweed brown
beige skirt that matches the dorm curtains,
and I woke up in love again.

I remembered her hem against her skin.
You're a sparrow against a window
one voice said. *Don't dream again*

another voice said (although the plumbing
will stay, the frozen and the flowing
will forever stay.) The light was numbing.

Two hands would not be enough
for the romance and the terror.
One held the dream stuff:

the gorgeous face of nothing, the other held the ransom,
the station to be knelt at, and the question,
what's the life and what's the martyrdom?

Song to the Papaya

Virgil Suarez

my grandmother sat on a cowhide *taurete*
in the kitchen of our house in Havana,

and I remember her peeling ribbons
of yellow-green rind off the meaty, pulpy

fruit. When she sliced open each fruit,
she smiled, scooped a handful of the black

seeds and put them in her mouth, then she
smiled at me. She spat them on the floor

and she said to me: *la sonrisa de los muertos*
the smile of the dead, each tiny seed a wish

at her feet, a hummingbird's black egg,
a broken rosary strewn on the floor, our

dog came through and lapped up all the seeds,
a magician's act with its pink, slobbering tongue.

On the table the halves of papaya, opened
like mouths, like slivers of bright light coming

over the cusp of mountains. The dead smile
too, and then the light swallows their shadows.

Nine Pounds to a Past Anorexic Self

Debbie Urbanski

i.

I buried you in the backyard under the laurel tree,
my starved sweetheart, your mound a hollow.
No monument to hurl your shadow,
no tombstone. I let you lie quietly
in the laurel's shade and if a dog someday
in full-mooned frenzy uproots
the yard, the perennials, and you,
your silvery scapula, your hoared femur bone—
I will not claim you for my own.

ii.

Yes people starve. Every second
some child's dying belly-swollen,
their buildings crumbled, wars broken
on their heads. The dead
always turning towards their dust
while sorrow spits mourning tunes
in the four corners of every room.
What didn't you have?
Was your world so unwieldy,
so out of proportion to perfect
with all its wild women curved like hills and old valleys
furrowed for a hundred harvests, a hundred births—

iii.

Mistaken for some minor god,
you could narrow arms to pinpricks
and banish thighs in a hack magician's trick
that drew, not gold, but yellow scarves
out from the crowd's lips.
At mountain summits when like God
you saw the tops of evergreens
and whole states knelt down to offer you
their lakes, a hawk's flight, and perspective,
you held your wrists up to the twigs,
to the tiny stones, to other women's bones.
I hope this helped the world:
righted some felled forest,

quieted the hunger of a nation
as you tucked, under a napkin, your meal.

iv.

I knew you before
your bones burst
out of skin like barbarians
and you touched your collarbone
every minute as if a bare table
heaving with manna.

v.

In prayer to sewer gods,
you hung your head in toilets
while demons in your belly sharpened their teeth.
They dragged food in their grand bile parade
up through your throat amid much applause and ticker tape.
Did you forget the quicker ways to die?
But you wanted a decade to carve
so slowly breaths off of your heart.
You wanted to be watched, carving.
You wanted to watch in grocery stores
all the aisles stocked with boxes you wouldn't eat
as women pushed their loaded carts
towards the bloodied meat.

vi.

The world's unchanged without you:
its nine or ten identical wars,
a fire devouring the forests
as if a million of Hell's acres
have risen to Earth, and the dead souls
that evaporate into sky
like a backwards thinking storm.

vii.

Towards your end I cradled you
my skin-wrapped dove feather,
your leaden soul long junked,
mind off circling plated food as if a moth
misdirected towards the porch light.
You now sky staring,
eyes stuck open
at the underbelly of Heaven,
mouth sutured shut with silk:

who misses you
except for me on days
when all the greens turn gray
and gravity a burden—

viii.

A dramatic retreat
into a quiet kitchen with bare shelves
and the fridge buzzing needlessly
cooling the empty crisper, a dark light bulb—
this was how to change the world?
Waving in the mirror, you meant farewell
and if again we meet, if one dawn you decide
to resurrect yourself from the frost-bit ground,
do not pretend to know me at a party.
Don't blow me kisses across the salt-smeared street.

ix.

Your youth, not shining:
broken hair, your brittle height
and an album where you were barely there, skeletoned,
not grinning into the eyes of cameras.
Clothes draped you like the moss.
Your fingers blued in the fall chill
and that toilet smell of shit and bleach
and brown ringlets circling the porcelain
in a furious infinity of waste.

I Hear Amos

Jared Webber

for B.B.

I have been given to crying about everything
for the past two years. I wipe my nose, my eyes.
I say of my life, sinner, absurd.

Now this is not for all of you. But just one of you.
You listen to me. If you can believe
believe this: every prophesy is also
a metaphor of the body.

In my mind I hear Amos reading:

*one field has rain
and the other does not
and it will dry up*

I am gentile rabbi.
This is my midrash:

Two feet are by one another
aimed in opposite ways
toe to ankle. One has love
but the other does not
and will die wanting others' rain.

O, no, O, piano
music, clef, eleven feet of sunflowers,
lamb meat, symphonies of Moscow,
cucumber sauce, prophets of Baal,
Civil War prose, kabbalah and
Roy Hobbs: you can't lead me away from this
passage because I hear Amos saying:
Who can but prophesy.

But these words of the Lord are not sanity.
Are you still listening? This can't make any
sense to you. But it's all about you.

Now I sit in a phone booth
in God damned Newark crying.
The Baptists have done so well.
I'm afraid of hell,
because I want so bad the sin of it all.

And I take my place with their condemned
just to dream about it all.
Thus, I wait to be taken away with a hook—
and if I'm last, with a fish hook.

Spiders

Rynn Williams

For Louise Bourgeois

She is French, you can tell by the fall
of the cloth coat. Small and gray, strict chignon.
She has lived in the same house for years—
before the galleries, the coffee bars. Now, rarely
coming down the long stoop, she is visible
from the street only sometimes: the front room

of the brownstone that flickers strangely
as she smokes by the window. The gaunt young man
returns from the market, arms full of groceries,
plastic bags ruffling. Yellow light fills the hall
behind her as she opens the door to him.
Part of the lore of the block: unsmiling,

turned slightly sideways in passing,
lace curtains, the television, a landscape
of file cabinets, the black beret, how he's twice
her size, how his pants hang from his body.
The yellow Grinstead's bags filled with
two-liter Coke bottles, packs of Pall Malls.

Theirs is a kind of feudal existence, him
fording the moat-gray sidewalk—
the little tyrant in the darkened tower
with nothing but giant jars of peanut butter,
Sicilian olives. A spider is crawling
along the far wall; his legs are as long as her arm.

I remember them on early summer evenings: she
with her head bent, intent, always talking and he
looking down to the same point on the sidewalk.
He would be carrying something, bending
over her. She would be clutching her small black
purse in one hand, in the other, a cigarette.

She is in the window, on the parlor floor, smoking.
Face like an old nectarine. People on the block say
they're a mystery, but how much of one, really?
We each have been spiders; the flies are everywhere,
wrapped in sticky thread, strung alongside our beds,
little dark shells still living in some kind of hope.

One day his bag broke in the middle of the street,
right in front of his stoop and he glanced up
quickly, toward the long windows as he stuffed
rolling apples in the pockets of his raincoat.
I watched him quickly wrapping some bread
and a package of cold cuts in shreds of plastic.

The spiders are out there, reclining
in their element. They stand in the heat
of the shower, reach for the largest slice
of bacon. They drum their fingers on the counter
while the others adjust the reception,
fold the hand towels. The expendables,

they require so little: a dream, an occasion,
a touch of nostalgia—memory
of the time when they were the hope
and the nourishment, a past
that they water like a thin, dry plant
on the edge of a windowsill.



Fiction

Field

Stephanie Dickinson

Nothing was coming. I stood on the shoulder alone with an exit sign to Zanesville. It wobbled in the wind. I wondered if right now Mom was awake in her unheated bedroom. I could hear her, *Come home, Angelique. You're going bareheaded.* I crouched as wind filled the sleeves of my jacket. Was it dark like this inside Mom's head when my father died? No light anywhere. I couldn't stand here all night. There were fields on either side of the interstate that fog was drifting off. I climbed over the guardrail and slid down the ditch. The fog would hide me. I kept my hands out in front of me like a sleepwalker. Tire tracks caught my boot heels. The long grass chiseled with frost. Straight ahead was something darker than the rest. I listened, but it wasn't alive so I kept walking. I stumbled into a backhoe. There was construction equipment scattered around along with highway dividers. They were probably clearing another lane for the interstate. The nearness of equipment made me feel safe.

I unrolled my father's sleeping bag, knowing his boyhood body had been the last inside it. Rocks poked from the ground. I squirmed around until I was able to lie flat. When I closed my eyes I heard the field: rodents and rabbits scuffling in the brush. A dog barked far away. I was three years old again on the sette in the farmhouse with the apple trees speaking to me, and the curtains whispering in the orchard breeze. When I listened, I couldn't sleep. It was like that now. It was worse. Trees creaked, but they were even farther away than the barking dog.

I needed to sleep. I hadn't slept for two days. I tried entering a room from the past. I used to make myself sleep on hot nights by imagining a room and filling it like the medicine chest in grandma's bathroom. Black salve in the orange can, talc and hair nets, tortoise combs, a fingernail file, aprons just ironed. The lonely whoosh of a truck shifting down on the interstate mixed with the rustling of grandma's work dresses. Then something shot by me in the grass. Out of the muffled hoot of an owl my friend Sandy Lint's trailer appeared between a creek and a dilapidated farm house, I saw the trailer's cramped kitchenette and Sandy's mom, cigarette smoke wafting around her teased hair-do, leaning against the pink refrigerator, chipping ice from the freezer box, unsticking a box of tater tots. All around were the horse statuettes, palominos with chain bridles. And Sandy with bleached blond hair, flat chest, and her sad wide smile leading me outside. Boys ran out from their hiding places by the creek. *Catch me, if you can.* Here to play kiss tag in the dusk. The trailer door banged, Sandy's mom coming to watch, setting a transistor radio on the steps. It was the song *Lightning is Striking Again* that finally helped me to close my eyes.

I was part of the field now. I knew every bone in my back and every ache when I shifted from side to side. I fell into a cold, shallow sleep. The black-haired boy chased me, dragging me behind the trailer—the harder I fought, the more I wanted to be kissed. His chipped front tooth rubbed over my lip. His deep kiss tasted of burnt leaves. The black-haired boy vanished and it was Easton chasing me. When he caught me his hands pulled up my shirt and pinched my breasts. My eyes flew open. Something had moved in the brush. I heard footsteps. Who would be walking here in the middle of the night? Someone was looking for me. The footsteps stopped. They were listening too. Was it someone coming to steal? I tried to pull my legs out of the sleeping bag, but the bag stuck to them. A thin beam of light rose up the bucket of the backhoe turning me to ice. The flashlight was shining over the seat where the operator sat; it played over the gearshifts, the steering wheel. The backhoe was enormous, a thing ready to charge, metal cartilage with a snout. It could sniff me. Then the footsteps came closer. The light sluiced over the ground. *I will die if the light touches me.* The flashlight picked the highway divider cones out of the dark, orange flames, immediately doused. My hand tightened over a rock. Then, miraculously, I heard the footsteps walk away. I listened, followed them into the brush. The footsteps were dragging something. Too dazed to care, I made myself pass out.

I felt light pouring from the Big Dipper on me in tiny drops, but it was the sun. I laughed out loud; I was alive, and thirsty. The interstate was rolling along; a flatbed tractor-trailer pulled a load of new cars. There were birds singing. Winter birds. I stood up and stretched. The field had gently rolling hills and on top of the next rise I saw a building. I was an explorer as I ambled toward it, trying to guess what it was, what it was doing in the middle of a field where there wasn't a road. It was a rotting greenhouse, an igloo of cellophane with most of the panes missing. I had discovered it. What were my high school classmates doing right now while I was exploring? Sitting in a college classroom, or standing on the Collin's factory line? Maybe there would be a water faucet that still worked. I walked into the green house past trays of clotted stems, frozen peonies, daffodils. I spotted a sink, tried the spicket, and filled my Mountain Dew can. There were broken pots and spades, orchids, frail white blooms like frozen stiff chicken feathers, in an arc. Was that why everything I saw belonged to me? I wiped my hands in the grass, rubbed frost over my face. I took my toothbrush out, spat on it and brushed my teeth with the toothpaste left on the bristles.

"Hey, you got a match?" a girl's voice startled me.

I screamed, whirling around. It was so sudden. I thought I was alone. A girl was lying in a bedroll next to a tray of rotting flowers. She was wearing sunglasses. When she shifted in her bag, a flashlight rolled out from under her. It must have been her footsteps last night. She sat up in her sleeping bag, rubbing the sleep from her face.

“Don’t know what happened to my frigging matches.”

I tossed her my matches. Two damp ones left. She had stolen my thunder. I wasn’t the only girl who had slept out in an open field. Here was someone just as brave as I was.

She held out her hand. “My name’s Rony. Rony with one ‘n.’”

“Angelique,” I said. I shook her hand, feeling a callous on her palm.

“You don’t look like an Angelique. My mother’s an exotic dancer. Her stage name is Angelique.” She grabbed onto my wrist and pulled herself up. “Don’t mind the sunglasses. I wear them to cut the glare of the straight people.”

Her sunglasses were wraparounds and out-of-style. She looked like Roy Orbison wearing them. And in a man’s white dress shirt, she was one of the few people I was taller than. Her face was long and plain, her ducktailed black hair dusty, but her eyes were an unusual violet color.

She let go of my wrist. “You look like a Dorothea.”

“You look like a Ronnie with two ‘ns,’” I knew I didn’t look like a Dorothea. What was she? More like a boy than a girl with her scruffy pointed boots. Why did all the people on the road have these smart mouths?

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“North Carolina.”

“How long have you been on the road?”

“Two days.” Two days that felt like two hundred years. I was going to visit a boy.

“I’m thirsty,” Rony said, grabbing the Mountain Dew can from me. Her fingernails were bitten to dirty quicks. “What is this? Piss?” She spat out the last mouthful.

“If it was piss you must like the taste of it.”

“You want a cig?” she laughed.

“Sure. Where are you from?” I asked. That was the third question of the road—after where are you going and what’s your name.

“Toronto,” she said. “Have an Export A?” She took out a green box and shook me a cigarette from it. “Do you wear a bra?”

“None of your business.”

“Me neither,” she said.

In the time it took her to smoke, she told me she was a native of Toronto, now heading for the Blue Ridge Mountains where she had a friend who was going to get her a job watching chlorine vats mature. She’d been riding a bus, but got sick of it and decided to thumb. She was hungry. Hadn’t eaten since Windsor, Ontario.

“I’m so hungry, I’ve been trying to fill up on smokes,” she said.

“You know we can hitch together for a bit. It’s safer that way, though no guy who knows what’s good for him will mess with me. I like women.”

I choked on my smoke. There were girls and ladies where I came from. No girls who liked girls. The only girl who liked girls I knew of was an old woman, Miss Sykes, the gym teacher who'd been in the military, who would stand in the shower room with her clipboard, smiling into the steam, checking our names off as we ran past her.

"I knew you were coming," Rony said. She unbuttoned her leather jacket and used the end of her shirt to clean her sunglasses. "And that Angelique was your name." She slid her sunglasses back on. "I saw you in my sleep, but you were wearing glasses. I new you'd be heading east."

Everyone on the road had visions. They saw signs in palms of hands, inside cave flames, no one believed in just coincidence. Road people drifted, they went along with things, letting fate take them. If I wasn't supposed to get to Easton, something would come up and hurl me in the opposite direction. The wind lifted a loose piece of the greenhouse's sheet plastic and sent it flappng. A cemetery smell of clay clung to the shovels. I pictured stems trickling down into my father's grave, roots tickling his throat.

"Let's get out of this spook show." Rony stamped her boots. "I parked my bag in there." She overturned a wheelbarrow and hauled out a duffel bag on a rope. "I bet you like men."

"I have a boyfriend."

Rony snorted. "Do you want to see a picture of my boyfriend?" She pulled a huge billfold from her pocket. It was a Woolworth photograph, taken in one of those tight photo booths where you pull the half curtain shut and smile hoping your eyes are open. Two dark-haired boy girls with their cheeks pressed together. Her friend wasn't pretty at all I thought, watching Rony drag her bag through clumps of bedraggled weeds. Then she stopped. A bird whistled. A wood thrush.

"Did you leave her up in Toronto?" I aksed.

"No," she said, unzipping her jeans. "She's waiting for me in West Virginia."

I watched her squat. She didn't wear underwear like me and her butt cheeks were tiny and pale like a kid's, her thighs were scrawny.

She pulled a handful of grass from the ground. "Are you thinking that I'm a rude chick taking a pee in a field?"

"You better believe it," I laughed. She wiped herself with the grass, the blades sticking to her ass when she pulled up her jeans. Her maple leaf belt buckle gleamed.

"Well, believe it or not, I'm a model." She hooked a thumb through a belt loop. "Would you carry my bag for a while? I'm dizzy."

I didn't answer; I just picked up her bag, wondering how dizzy she really was since she immediately lit up another Export A. I wrapped the strap of the duffel bag around my hand; the bag must have been heavier than she was. She was following me like we'd been ordered to march single file. If I stopped, she'd run into me. I walked into the wind. She was hanging back like she wanted to make me uncomfortable.

"What'd you model?"

"My skin. My mother works as an artist model part-time. I used to go with her to the drawing class because she couldn't afford a babysitter. Then they wanted to draw me too. She's probably pretty worried about me. I'm going to send her a postcard. In a few months, after I'm set up."

"Not me." I bumped into a guardrail that was hidden in brush. "I'm never going to write mine," I said, rubbing my knees.

"That's cold. You must have a serious beef."

I shrugged. There was the interstate in front of us, cars sailing past, the downshifting of an eighteen-wheeler. Across the four lanes was an Ecco gas station. "Let's go wash up at that gas station. We look pretty rough."

"Speak for yourself, Dorothea," Rony sneered. "I like to look rough. Besides we're getting a ride in a station wagon. I've already seen it, Dorothea."

"Don't call me Dorothea. I want to go over to that Ecco and get some coffee."

"Hold your horses. There's our ride." Rony stuck out her thumb.

Sure enough a station wagon was coming toward us. It beeped and pulled onto the shoulder. When it stopped a girl and a boy jumped out of the front seat. The girl had white blond hair and the boy was red-haired and freckled. They opened the back door and dove in.

Rony ran for the station wagon. "Dorothea, you get in the middle."

"You get in first." I balled my fists. I wasn't on the road to be told what to do.

A middle-aged man with a buzz haircut who could have been my high school guidance counselor got out and walked around the car. He took Rony's duffel bag from me and threw it over his shoulder.

"Get in," he said after he tossed the bag in back. He wiped something orange off his chin. He'd probably eaten his share of Sloppy Joes at the high school cafeteria. He even dressed like my high school counselor in a checked jacket with mismatched checked pants.

Rony pinched me. "Get in. This is the car that was supposed to come."

I slid in. There was a pack of old church bulletins on the seat.

"Gene Burry, Sr.'s my name. That's Gene, Jr. but he calls himself Chip. And that's my sweetheart Sara," he said, snapping his seat belt.

It was the most important thing, your own name. The names again.

Rony leaned over me and grinned at Gene Sr. "I'm Rony and she's Dorothea."

The station wagon lumbered back onto the highway.

"I'm Angelique and she's Dorothea," I snapped.

The little blond girl leaned over the seat. She had those wild eyes that kids have. Pure blue. "I like Rony for a name. How come you don't have any hair?"

Rony laughed, "A bear ate it off."

Gene hit the accelerator, just as I remembered he hadn't asked where we were going.

"We're going to Parkersburg," I said.

"I think we can carry you pretty much the whole way," Gene Sr. said.

I sat back, watching the speedometer needle that didn't go above fifty. The heater was on full blast and my feet were stuck on the hump right under it. I had a lapful of church bulletins and Rony kept wiggling in the seat. Gene Burry, Sr. wouldn't close his mouth. He was a deacon to three rural churches; he was on his way to a revival at the Witness Mission in Parkersburg, West Virginia. He'd been driving all night among his flocks. If we were hungry there was a sack of pickle loaf sandwiches in back.

"The Lord is giving his inheritance tonight," he flashed his foot long grin, "To my boy Chip."

I rolled my eyes. Rony began singing *itsi bitsi spider*...whenever she sang *itsi* she nudged me with her leg. I moved my leg, her leg moved too. I pushed her leg away and glared. There was a smirk on Rony's lips.

"You're crowding me." I hated to be hot. I hated to be awake first thing in the morning without my coffee. Rony nudged me when we passed a sign to Pond Licking Road. There were sparse stands of oak and hemlock passing by as the sun climbed into the windshield. Old logging skids and hills.

"Okay, Chip, should we take I-75 to Parkersburg or should we take the old way?" Gene Sr. asked, licking his dry lips. I didn't like his tie clip with two crossed rifles on it. I watched his Adam's apple when he swallowed. It was pointed rather than round. His tongue flicked over his lip again.

The boy kicked the seat behind me. "The old way."

I felt a twinge; my gut was telling me we shouldn't go the old way.

"I'd like to use you like a pillow of goat's hair," Rony whispered. "You're just so straight, girl."

I wasn't straight. I was a rebel down to the bone.

"Your posture, girl, could you throw your shoulders any farther back?" Rony laid her head on my shoulder. Her dark hair smelled of empty flowerpots.

"This sure is pretty country." I tried to shrug Rony's head off.

"I like to think this is God's country, but we have our problems. Kids are taking dope in these woods. Husbands going to nudie shows in Parkersburg. Girls are getting birth control pills. Homosexuals are rampaging."

Preaching was what I hated worse than anything in the world, religious folks who drove the speed limit, daddies who wouldn't stop at cafés but carried pickle loaf sandwiches and drove station wagons.

"I've never seen anyone with posture like yours," Rony's breath tickled my ear.

"Lord has yet to give a boy the gift. Chip's going to be the first one."

"And David took her; and she came unto him; and he lay with her," Chip recited as he kicked the seat.

Rony clapped. "You tell them Chip." Then she started humming *itsi bitsi spider*.

I would have to get out of the car; I couldn't stand this all the way to Parkersburg.

Gene Sr. chuckled. "Are you girls saved by the way?"

Rony piped up, "I was raised Hari Krisni, then Children of God. I'm in my seventh incarnation."

"No wonder you're running away from home or what have you," Gene Sr. said, pointing ahead to a sign that read *Jesus is the Lord of Tar Hollow*. He turned on the radio to a Bible station. A preacher with a twang was telling a joke about a truck stop waitress. The congregation mooded like a herd of cows. A streak of gas shot through me. I needed a rest stop or even the ditch.

"What about you?" Gene Sr. turned to me. "Have you given your life to Christ?"

"I grew up Presbyterian," I said. I stared down at the pamphlets in my lap. There was a drawing of a snake, coiled around a branch, a large eyed snake with a neck ring. *He gives power over the Serpents!* That looked a lot more interesting than the bulletins back home with a steeple on the cover. But I wasn't anything anymore. I had been stuffed with it.

"She's not saved," Chip said, kicking the back of the seat. "They're both in danger of Hell."

"And you're in danger you little twerp," Rony growled, turning in the seat.

Sara was singing *itsi bitsi spider* now. The sun had plucked itself off the beautiful barren trees and was shining in my eyes. I envisioned paradise: a toilet in my aunt's house, the olive green oval one, the white porcelain pot on the farm, the outhouse at Great Aunt Anna's with its chicken coop smell and corn husk toilet paper. I was giving it my best shot. Great Aunt Anna moved her bowels twice a day or else took to her sick bed, and that's why she was 90 years old. Sweat broke out on my forehead. Then I farted.

"OOOOOHHHHHHH," Chip screamed.

GeneBurry pressed the automatic window button and all four windows went down. The odor of cold pine glided in. "I bet you don't have good homes. I bet you both could use love."

"I could use a rest area, Burry," Rony said. "Fast."

She was covering for me. It was a deed of kindness. Maybe she wasn't so bad. Her scruffy leather jacket and wraparounds, her duck tail

hair, her smart mouth. She didn't have to be nice all the time. I wanted to know what that felt like not to care.

"Do you think you can find a rest area with coffee? I need my java," Rony said.

Her leg nudged mine. I let it stay there.

Gene Sr. announced, "We don't drink coffee in Witness Mission. That's a stimulant."

Chip giggled, "We only drink strychnine."

Gene Sr. glared into the rear view mirror. "That's enough, Chip. You're getting too big for your britches that's what I'm thinking."

"Pop, there's the exit. Goodie, we're taking the old way," Chip clapped.

"The old way! The old way," Sara bounded in her seat behind us.

Burly exited off the interstate, heading down a loopy two-lane highway. We were climbing. Little valleys with rock ridges. Hills with yellowish deposits. A few shrunken pines. Houses growing into hills, sheds ready to tumble down. I kept my eyes peeled for a gas station.

"See that?" Gene Sr. pointed. "That's yellow boy. Sulfuric acid from the mines. Death."

Yellow streaks ran down the hillsides. We kept driving past the yellow streaks and the trees, more and more of the same. We crossed an old bridge, the boards rattling as we passed. Archers Fork Trail. We bumped over the broken old highway. Gene Sr. drove by a Mobil.

I looked back at the red winged flying horse. The sign was propped up against the side of the station. "Wasn't that a gas station?" I asked.

"I didn't see it," Gene Sr. huffed. "I was just moved by the power of the holy spirit, I'm just doing God's will. He wants to save you girls." He stuck a finger into his ear and scratched.

Then Chip laughed. "I'm going to be given the power over serpents."

Gene Sr. lifted his eyebrows into the rearview. "Don't be speaking of such things."

I saw the way his face changed when he looked into the rear view, like he wasn't all jolly and fun. He was an old rattler.

"There's something," Rony said, pointing to the Hess station we were sailing past. "Hey, why didn't you stop?"

"That Hess thing?" Gene Sr. said. "It wasn't open."

Liar. I started keeping track of the towns we passed. Serpent Mound. Locust Grove, Sinking Spring, Wilkesville, Coolville, Fly, Sistersville.

"Hey, you want me to shit my pants?" Rony blurted. "Let us out. Anytime."

Sara giggled.

"I promise the very next place we see I'll stop," Gene Sr. cleared his throat. "What's the worst thing you ever did, Rony? You can be cleaned. Pure as Sara."

"I like to hustle girls," Rony said.

"Everyone knows God hates fags," Chip blurted.

Gene Sr.'s face purpled and his throat made a choking sound, "Well, that's just the men fags. Everyone knows girl fags just like to hold hands. Am I right about that? You two are probably going steady?"

"I'm trying to convince the girl that we'd make a nice couple," Rony said. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Am I right that's what you girl queers do...you just hold hands?" He scowled at Sara who was leaning against Rony's seat. "Sit back, Sara. Do you want to go through the windshield if I hit something? You girls are pretty enough. I figure either one of you could get a man."

I could feel the station wagon was going north. Parkersburg was southeast. The drive should have been beautiful, but even the rocks looked dry and thirsty. Gene Sr. had Chip distribute the pickle loaf sandwiches, but they didn't give us anything to drink, not even strychnine. More little towns rolled by. Dog Hollow. Redemption Hollow. There was deepness to the horizon, the Blue Ridge Mountains. We drove past more strip-mined hillsides, more yellow boys.

"Please, Rony," the girl Sara said, tugging on the seat behind Rony. "Sing more."

"Sit back, Sara," Gene Sr. snapped. "God damnit."

"What was that, Gene?" Rony grinned. "I didn't hear you."

Then a cemetery came out of the trees, wood markers unpainted and gray as barn boards. Gene Sr. pulled the car onto the shoulder. "There's an outhouse back in those trees."

When Rony pushed open the car door and jumped out, I grabbed my bag and scrambled after her. I looked around. Even the pines in the graveyard were shedding their needles like no one and nothing had money around here; they had to dig their own graves up in these hills. I raced to the outhouse and pulled the door closed behind me. I yanked down my jeans and sat. It was a one-seater. A dried wasp nest hung from the rafters. A toaster cozy hung from a nail instead of toilet paper. It was embroidered...*And Another Died in the Bitterness of his Soul*. I held my breath. The outhouse stank like burnt hair and old shit. I wondered why a person's own shit didn't smell bad, but everyone else's did. The last person who sat on this hole must have turned to bones long ago.

I could hear Rony and the little girl coming.

"Look, Rony, there's a chokecherry. Let's eat berries," Sara shouted.

"Get back here, Sara," Gene Sr. hollered. "RIGHT NOW."

I heard the little girl laugh as she ran. Then a car door slammed and Chip screamed, "And worms shall come over them." The station wagon pulled away, gravel popping under the tires. I couldn't believe it. Christians stranding us here in the middle of nothing.

"Hey, guess what?" Rony tapped on the outhouse door. "That old bastard dumped us. I think he thought I was going to homosexualize

his daughter.”

“What about your duffel bag?” I was about to pull up my jeans when Rony yanked the door open, her wraparounds peering in.

“Gone, baby. You look cute on the shitter. Where’s your corn cob?”

“I think this is it,” I pointed to the toaster cozy. We both began to laugh. I slapped my knee until I was crying and hiccupping.

She suddenly stopped laughing. I looked at her. There was a little mole on her upper lip. She was shivering.

“Are you sick?” I aksed.

“I’m dying of thirst.”

“Let’s eat those chokecherries.”

I lay down on the old grave where a chokecherry bush was planted. Rony picked the berries, rolled them around in her mouth, then spat them into her hand. “You want some? I cleaned them for you.”

“Sure,” I said. The chokecherries were nipped by frost and juiceless.

Rony sat behind me. She leaned over to read the sunken stone with the black name. *Coonrod Welter...Survived two wives*. There were two smaller stones on either side of his. *Maria, Age 12. Reziaah, Age 62*. Milkweed grew on Maria’s grave. Her grave was so old the earth had buckled and sunk.

Rony scrambled to her feet and kicked her scruffy boot into the *Coonrod* stone. “You bastard.” Then she spit on the stone. “That’s a man for you.”

When she stretched out beside me I smelled her hair full of leaves and frost. I smelled the same field that I’d slept in the night before, the fear, the skittering animals, the Big Dipper, the same excitement about life. The trees creaked. Wind blew through the shagbarks, making them mutter like they were speaking in tongues.

Rony shivered against me. “Will you just hug me?”

When I put my arm around her, she started to cry. I patted her as sobs and hiccups jerked her back. “What’s wrong? Is it losing your duffel bag?”

Then she lifted her head and kissed me.

It wasn’t any different from kissing a boy. Maybe softer. Neither of us had brushed our teeth. But Rony’s mouth was sweet all the same. Maybe it was only men who had bad breath.

“You’re still afraid of me.”

“I’m not scared of you at all.”

Rony broke off a stalk of milkweed, crushing the bulb and blowing milkweed into my face. “Everyone’s a lesbian. Even you.”

“You’re the first gay girl I’ve ever met.”

“No, I’m not, you just didn’t know it.”

Holding hands we walked along the back road for three miles before we came to the highway. She went north and I went east. Only two days on the road and I was in mourning.

The Understory and the Overstory

Bruce Smith

An excerpt from the novel *X's and O's*

When she was a girl, Olivia roamed the house. Alone in the hallways and stairwells wall papered in rose and ivy, she derived her idea of Nature. And from the sycamores with their scabby bark and the gingko with its excremental fruit, her Philadelphia self. And, more recently, from the weed and brush of the turnpike, from the paper bags in the trees of New York, her soul flower.

In the illuminated book of Olivia's life there was an understory and an overstory.

For the overstory she followed the ivy and rose up the stairs into her mother and father's bedroom—a victory garden of white chenille bedspread and mirror framed with scrolled roses under which was Baby's crib. The things of the room seemed cast off by the older people in the stuffy collars and bonnets of ago, rather than something ancestral or inherited. Olivia had no past. She had no sense of generations. No grandparents, or great grandparents, no elder voices. She knew “before the war” and “during the war,” which overlapped into “now.” Wasn't there a war now? Nixon and napalm? What she knew of the past she found in the closet, the cuffs of pants and the tongues of belts on her back as she bent to read the letters that her father wrote to her mother.

On one side of the closet, the sports shop paraphernalia and pants with maybe a rayon dress or two. On the other side a few slacks bent over hangers and white shirts on their black twisted wires with maybe an army uniform or two still smelling of dry-cleaning fluid. There were in the back, two deflated dodge balls like pink platelets and an old leather helmet with “Lions” stenciled on the inside. A tire pump with a needle on the end of its limp, plaid mesh hose made a wheezy asthmatic noise as Olivia pumped it. And in between the ditty bags and duffels was a tin box stenciled with Jones. In it was the letters. Onionskin and tinted papers with deckle edges—stationery with the American flag rippling out of the upper left-hand corner. She read in the little light, in the aroma of shoe leather and polish and sweat, about the source of her forming.

Evidently, Olivia came from the war. And love. The love was deep in the rag content of the paper and it would only surface like a U boat at the end of the letters, Love, Joe. A drop of sweat often fell from Olivia's lip and disappeared into the paper as she read his handwriting—a perfect Palmer method penmanship in blue fountain pen, but still mysterious for what was missing: the tears. Did he miss her? Did he burn for her in the

night? Did he want to be scattered with her ashes? If he gasped and panted and lusted and ached, was it for her or for the gruesome and glamorous business of war? Olivia could not understand for all the legibility, the talk about the tongues of fire and the miracle and the rushing mighty wind.

The rest was shrapnel and traction, Allied and Axis, the news that stays news—the spilled information that was troops and numbers and letters designating troops and pinched lips preventing sunk ships. Two braids of hair: a short swatch of Joe's brown encircled by Josephine's ash blonde and tied with a red, white, and blue ribbon. Somewhere in these letters was the urge that made them fall into each other and share that bed and this closet. Perspiring, and dizzy from the dry, superheated dust, Olivia folded the letters back into their envelopes. What did she see in him? And what did he see back? Olivia emerged and took a breath of air that was cool as water.

"As if a grenade had gone off," Josephine said of her bedroom, and Olivia thought she meant the mess of it. But she meant something else. There was a deep feral aroma from the bedclothes; a chemical that Olivia would understand much later was trace rapture. A parallelogram of light outlined a tiny South Pacific of sheet and blanket. "As if a bomb went off," Olivia hear her mother say, and when Josephine said it, her face had the strange radiance of those faces at the bomb testing sites. It was the face of someone brushed by a seraph.

What did Olivia know of the overstory? The sheets were reeking secrets. Love was unspoken fire. Love was an alibi. From this she came.

Of the understory Olivia could hear pounding in the basement. She could hear humming or throat clearing or prayer. Was that football on the radio, the collective groan of sixty thousand throats? It was a treacherous descent down the basement stairs—murky, dim—that Olivia made to listen to the smithings behind the door. Straight-ahead at the bottom of the stairs was the storm door to the neighborhood, the 3600 block of Meridian with its uniform brown and cream. A hard left under the stairs: the father room.

Leaked under the wooden door came the sounds: Nixon, Eisenhower and Nixon, whoever they were. The basement said Suez and Gaza and Castro. It said rock and roll and Sweet Jesus. It said blood and hunger and oil, the Congo, and the bubble chamber. It said segregation and desegregation, whatever that was. Longshoreman and steelworkers. It was coded stereo (although at that time hi-fi). It was Billie Holiday and Mario Lanza.

Once, when she thought she heard weeping, Olivia tried the handle of the door. Instantly, her fingers and her palm and underneath her elbow were bee stung. The jolt went through her shoulder to a place behind her ear. Electricity ran down the inside of her thigh. She ran up the stairs, ashamed or terrified that her father had done this to her. She stood on one

leg and looked in the mirror behind the coat closet door in order to see her whole lanky self where she felt only half. She used both hands to touch herself until she materialized. Her father was an absent presence. Her father was magneto and taboo.

The understory was voltage and voices.

Olivia would share the mid-ground with Baby and her mother. When Josephine left the house for the office, her mother wore navy blue sweat clothes as a man would wear a serge suit. When she returned, raucous, healthy crumpled into her sweats, she made growls and the whoops and snorts of a woman who enjoyed her work. Josephine spent her days with relay races, softball throws, the Western Roll of the high jump, the pick and roll of basketball. She was to her students kindly, tough, "Miz Jones, she know karate." She taught the skinniest kids in the city. "The Biafran gym team," she called them.

Other families had their guilt mavens, monsters of alcohol, blood lords, and meanies, Olivia had a mother who ruled by her physique. Like the borsch-belt joke, when Josephine sat around the house, she sat around the house. She sprawled. She pervaded. She dwelled. Olivia remembered the living room being occupied by her mother's body, the long legs, the great rib cage, and the sinews in the neck. Josephine's thighs were muscled like a racehorse, and she gloried in them. With her Mickey Spillane novels, she was the private eye of the sofa. She diffused herself into the air, which smelled of body—distilled things like liquor and soup and oil. She would call to Olivia, "If you can't play a sport, be one," as she would ask for a highball or another beer foamed into a tall glass with gold rings around the lip. Josephine did karate on the newspaper, scratched and stretched as she prepared to go bowling after eating the meal that Joe had prepared: a saltimboca followed by one of his spectacular desserts: a glazed fruit tart. Sometimes Josephine took a stance on the sofa like a hockey goalie, on the balls of her toes, just resting her ass on the cushion, a wide base; as if preventing the onslaught from the black and white TV set—Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald—from getting beyond her. She ruled. She had the whip hand. She called the shots.

Joe never left the house, it appeared, although he had to get the ingredients for the meals. Joe seldom joined them for meals. "He's busy in the basement," Josephine said and that phrase became her universal excuse. "What are you doing?" "I am Busy in the basement." But the food was good. Olivia, Baby and Josephine dispatched the polenta with a Gorgonzola sauce, a salad with dandelion leaves, pignoli, fresh bread. It was a kind of manna; it fell on the table from on high. Or below.

Where could Olivia go for her own surge and swell? She brooded. She made shadow plays from the sunlight through the blinds: dramas of resentment, dramas of wish fulfillment. "What are you doing?" her mother would ask her. "I'm busy in my basement," Olivia would answer.

She invented herself as the heroine of the orphan play. How else could she have been born into the family? She was left alone with the dust motes, the ivy and rose wallpaper, the hum of wire and a *knick, knick, knick* from the basement. She made American mystery plays. She would talk back to the television, "Winky Dink and You." Fighting babble with babble.

The beginning of her secrets, the split with the mother cell, were dreamy dreams. A horse in a field of timothy. Girl boy kissing. Girl girl kissing, what was that like? Roaming the house as one roams the moors, Olivia was a Brontë. She dreamt she found love, like a sparrow finds a pane of glass. She exaggerated. She took the stories of other's into her: the circus family, the nun for a day, the Jews with tattoos, the foundling, the Negro, a starving Armenian. She had secrets and made up pain. She lost a limb, a father, she had cancer. She was Madame Curie—and irradiated genius. She was Emma Goldman, "If you can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution." A turbulent interior girl, she turned to the mind as a somewhere distinct from the mother body. She wrestled with angels.

"Olivia? Olivia, don't be tuning me out. What are you doing there, cutting out paper dolls?"

Olivia said nothing. Olivia thought, "A boy will see me from afar and love me."

"You can play anything you want, just don't play with dolls. Let's go outside and toss the ball around."

Olivia thought, "A ball gown and a cloak and high-heeled slippers."

She coaxed, in her mind, the men on the cowboy and cop shows, the reluctant, emotionally stunted men, to song.

Olivia went deeply into the wood of the pencil and blew on the point like a coal. She smeared some of the gray black over her fingers and loved the lead as if it were some fine dust from the mines where the gnomes worked bringing up that coal they squeezed to diamond. In lead Olivia found something dark from the deepest part of the house, and brought it up into the light making the jars and nittles of prewriting, then the letter—miraculous translation of sound that was still in her throat like a homesickness for the future.

When she found out at thirteen it was graphite, she was sad. It was about tears she wrote, about what she could not find elsewhere. Words in a row on the school board's cheap paper imbedded with wood chips her mother stole from school. The secret and the stolen. It made her burn.

TEARS

by Olivia DeAngelis Jones

Nobody's dead, yet
Although mother's in a sweat
And father's in the basement

Doing something electric.
There is a box upstairs
They use to hold their hairs
They tie them in a knot
I don't go there a lot.

But when I do I cry
There is a reason why
It's not that I am sick
Maybe I'm allergic.

My mother has hips
The size of battle ships
My father has no lips
He just zaps and zips.

My mother reads her mysteries
She doesn't cross her knees
I saw my father once
He disappeared for months

We have a whole peach pie
There is no need to cry.
We have highballs and beers
There is no need for tears.

When Miss Bliss, their neighbor, came over to visit with her mother and have a highball, Olivia would listen from the stairs. They spoke about love. The kind Miss Bliss went to New York for, not the tearless kind in the letters. The kind with taxis and tobacco and perfume. The kind with lost high heels and a run in the stockings. The story Miss Bliss told turned to whispers the laughter; it turned to tears. The story had smoke and a drink or two at a restaurant with a red leather banquette. Her mother and Miss Bliss also had a drink or two. It was about Romance, this story. Romance was a dance. It was different from love. For a romance, the man and the woman went off somewhere, to the dunes where they were discovered naked. Or an elevator. Or they went to the top of somewhere, to the tip, to the bottom. In the telling Miss Bliss would toe off her suede slippers and curl her legs. Olivia's mother would crouch on the sofa like a catcher waiting for a breaking ball on the outside corner.

About the body there would be questions from Josephine. Height, weight, visible scars, as in a police investigation. And details about shape and structure and interesting features.

"What's he look like?" Josephine would ask.

"Six feet, patrician nose, cleft chin..."

“Oh, I love a cleft chin. I’m a sucker for a cleft chin.”

Handsome. Not movie star handsome, a bit thin, a bit drug addict handsome, not cute, handsome. A *je ne sais quoi*. A *joie de vivre*. A *pomme de terre frites*. You would look at him twice.”

“Who would look at him twice? I’m a married woman. What about the biscuit?”

“Nice. Cute. It’s the one thing you want cute. You would look at it twice.”

“You would look at it twice. And the jelly roll?”

“Adequate. Serviceable. My dear, it’s the gestalt, though.”

“The gestalt?” Josephine said.

“The whole package. The basket, the peppermints, and the work he’s willing to do. Eyes that look down to your ovaries. Brown. Brown. Restless, I like that. A restlessness, a fucked-up but not psychotic look. A discontent. Yowl. Like his mama raised him right to treat you nice before he,” Miss Bliss looked around, not seeing Olivia, or seeing her and saying it anyway, “made you come ten times.”

“Yowl. Only ten times? Sounds to me like love.”

“You think so? Sounds to me like the business. Love? If love is what he does before he goes back to his girlfriend—may her ugly pumps be filled with urine—in Washington, D.C. What’s missing was the music and the money. He had the looks and the fucked-upedness necessary to make some bad decisions. The decisions just went against me, or for me, since I think I was just about ready to bid him adieu.”

“What is it with you? You’re always ready to kiss them off.”

“It’s my way of being irresistible and fascinating, being unknowable.”

And Love was lies. Men told them. Women wanted to believe then did then didn’t. This one with the cute biscuit and the package and the girlfriend told lies to Miss Bliss. And he told them to himself. He was the worst. Miss Bliss saw through them, the white lies that bled to gray before it became the black center of her eye looking at his. She broke it off. The relationship. Not the thing in the package. The stories were about tears and lies and the package.

Olivia wanted to be able to lie like that. A body of lies brings you to tears that bring you to words. And the money and the music. Irresistible. She would try to write it all down after she crawled upstairs.



Translation

Paradiso, Canto Ten

Anthony Esolen

Excerpt from Dante's *Divine Comedy*

That inexpressible and primal Power,
 looking on his begotten Son with Love
 they breathe eternally, created all
That turns through mind or place in Heaven above
 with an order so sweet, no one can gaze
 upon the world without a taste of Him.
Unto those lofty wheels then, Reader, raise
 your eyes with me, direct them to that part
 where two celestial circles cross and pass,
And fall enamored of that Master's art
 whose gaze will never turn from what He's made,
 so deeply does He love it in His heart.
See how the ring that sweeps the planets round
 tilts as it shoots from there, to satisfy
 the world that calls upon their influence:
For had their highway not been pitched awry
 it would have quelled the power of many a star
 and rendered almost every potency
Dead here below; but to come just too near
 or veer a little further from the level
 would rob the order of each hemisphere.
Stay at your bench, now, Reader; stay, and dwell
 on these small hints that whet the appetite,
 and taste elation long before you tire!
I've set the table; take you now and eat;
 for now the matter calls on all my care,
 turning my mind to the command, to write
What I have seen. The noblest minister
 of Nature, he whose light divides the day,
 who most imprints the world with heavenly power,
Touching those crossing circles in the sky,
 turned in the spirals of his summertime
 of ever earlier rising; there was I
Turning with him, but did not feel the climb,
 unless I noticed it as someone feels
 thought on the instant, when the thought has come.

For it is Beatrice who so reveals
 the good and better, with such sudden flight,
 her act has no extent in time. The souls
 Within that sun I entered, ah how bright!
 For not by color were they visible,
 but by their own intensity of light.
 On wit and use and art I'll call and still
 never find words for you to picture it.
 Believe, and thirst to see it for yourselves.
 And if our fancy cannot touch such height,
 no wonder: for the eye has never known
 splendor on earth surpassing the sun's light.
 So the fourth family of the Father shone,
 who fills their hunger ever, revealing how
 He breathes His Spirit and begets His Son.
 And Beatrice began, "Give thanks, give thanks
 to the Sun of the angels, Him whose grace
 has raised you to this sun that men can see."
 Mortal heart never fed on any food
 that made it readier to sing the Lord's
 praises, and give itself in gratitude,
 Than I was, when I heard my lady's words:
 I gave my love to Him so utterly
 Beatrice was forgotten in eclipse.
 She wasn't displeased—rather so smiled at me
 that the resplendence of her laughing eyes
 clove my mind, drawing it from unity.
 For I saw flames of overwhelming life
 wreathing us round to form a flashing crown,
 sweeter in song than radiant to the sight:
 As when the evening air is filled with mist,
 we sometimes see Latona's daughter weave
 her moonlight for a sash about her waist.
 In Heaven's court, whence I have come again,
 shine many gems so beautiful and rare,
 laden with them the memory cannot leave:
 Such was the hymning of the brilliant there.
 To fly to them, fashion yourself a wing—
 or wait for tidings from the deaf and dumb!
 Those ardent suns that had not ceased to sing,
 as starts revolving round the pole nearby,
 revolved about us three times in a ring,
 Then stopped: as ladies pausing in their glee,
 hold the reel's places and resume the dance
 when they catch the returning melody.

Began one dancer: "When the radiance
 of the Lord's grace, which lights the flames of true
 love and by love still grows eminence,
 With such multiplication shines in you
 it leads you up these stairs no man may take
 descending, without climbing up anew,
 He who'd deny his flask of wine to slake
 your thirst, would not be free, would have such power
 as rivers not returning to the sea!
 You long to know who are the plants that flower
 engarlanding your lady with our love,
 the lovely one who strengthens you for Heaven.
 I was a lamb among the holy flock
 Dominic leads to pasture by his rule,
 where you can fatten well if you don't rove.
 My brother and my master was the soul
 nearest my right, great Albert of Cologne,
 and Thomas, of Aquinas, was my name.
 If you wish to be sure of everyone,
 follow my words, follow them with your eyes,
 turning them roundabout this blessed crown.
 This the third flaming rises from the smile
 of Gratian, he who lent both realms of law
 assistance that delighted Paradise.
 The other near him who adorns our choir
 was Peter, he who gave his widow's mite,
 his simple treasure, to the Holy Church.
 Most beautiful among us, the fifth light
 breathes with such love that all the world below
 is gluttonous to hear of him: within
 That radiance is the high mind blessed to know
 to such great depths, no second ever rose
 who saw so much, if what is true is true.
 See where the candle there beyond him glows:
 he in the flesh most deeply peered into
 angelic being and its ministries.
 The following lantern glimmers with the joy
 of that defender of the Christian days
 who helped Augustine by his history.
 Now if your mind will follow upon my praise,
 your eyes proceeding on from light to light,
 you'll thirst to know about the eighth. Because
 He saw all that was good, now in delight
 shimmers that spirit who made manifest
 how the world cheats—to all who hear him right.

The flesh whence he was driven lies at rest
in the crypts of Cieldauro; but he came
from martyrdom and exile to this peace.
Beyond him see the ardent souls, the flame
of Isidore, of Bede, or Richard, he
who was, in contemplation, more than man.
This one, at whom your sight comes round to me,
is the gleam of a soul who came to bear
thoughts that so burdened him, death seemed too slow:
He is the light eternal of Siger,
who when he lectured in the Street of Straw,
syllogized truths that made him hated there.”
Then like a tower clock that tolls the hour
when the bride of the Lord rises to sing
morningsong to her Spouse, to win His love,
Sounding so sweet a knelling of ting ting
as all the gears within it push and pull,
a soul that’s well-disposed must hear the ring
And swell with love: so now I saw that wheel
rendering voice to voice in harmony,
and in sweet temper that no man can feel
If not where joy is for eternity.



Contributors' Notes

Stuart Bartow lives in Salem, New York, and teaches writing and literature at Adirondack Community College. His chapbook, *The Perseids*, was published by the Palanquin Press of the University of South Carolina in 1997. In 2001 his collection, *Whelk*, was published by the Pygmy Forest Press.

Robert Cooperman tries to write full-time. His latest collection, *The Widow's Burden*, was finalist for the *Forward Magazine* Book of the Year. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* (Western Reflections) won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry for 2000.

Hildred Crill teaches poetry in schools for the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, and is a student in the M.F.A. Program at New England College. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Colorado Review*, and other journals.

Stephan Delbos is a native of Plymouth, Massachusetts. He is a sophomore English major at Providence College. His writing has been featured in "The Muzine," a publication of AS220, a collective of artists and writers in the Providence area.

Stephanie Dickinson was raised in rural Iowa and has lived in Wyoming, Oregon, Minnesota, Texas, and Louisiana. She now resides in New York City. Her poetry and fiction appear or will appear in *Mudfish*, *Cream City Review*, *Chelsea*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Washington Square*, *Nimrod*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Descant Iron Horse Review*, among others. Along with Rob Cook, she co-edits the new print literary journal *Skidrow Penthouse*. Her first novel *Half Girl* is presently before publishers.

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Virgil Suarez was born in Havana, Cuba and has lived in the United States since 1974. His essays, stories, poems, and translations continue to appear both nationally and internationally in diverse journals and reviews. He divides his time between Miami and Tallahassee where he lives with his family.

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Jared Webber is a student in the New England College M.F.A. Program. He lives and writes in Grandville, Michigan.

Rynn Williams's poems have appeared in *The Nation*, *Field*, *Puerto el Sol*, *North American Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among other magazines. She has received a fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, a scholarship from Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, and has been awarded residencies from the Ragdale Foundation and Dorland Mountain Arts Colony. She lives in Manhattan.

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Ira Joe Fisher
Jacqueline Gens
Arthur Gottlieb
Mary Walker Graham
Amy Hauck
Peter Johnson
Martha Marinara
Ted McCrorie
Mai Miller
Rachel Molino
Beth Nerbonne
Hendrick Paul
Jane Lunin Perel
Eric Rawson
Larissa Santoro
Patrick Shea
Bruce Smith
Virgil Suarez
Debbie Urbanski
Jared Webber
Rynn Williams